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THE LIMITATIONS OF FREETHINKING.

THE bane as well as the boast of this age is intellectual pride. The volume of our conceit is sometimes in the inverse ratio of the sum of our consequence; and in the absence of all other claim to importance, we can be proud even of our pride. But ours is not a vain conceit; there is in our bounding self-assertion the pulse of lofty consciousness and the tickling testimony of the century's "well-done." We can demonstrate that we have wrought many and great changes in the social and material conditions of the race; and with every change we can point to a corresponding improvement. We have entered on a path of discovery that must eventually lead to the recovery of the lost unities of nature. We have solved many of the knottiest problems of society; and among our happiest exploits, we can boast of having unearthed the long-lost truth, that humanity is one and indivisible, bound up in unity of origin and indivisibility of destiny. We have broadened and deepened the foundations of society, and upon the bed-rock of nature's postulates have laid the broad base of the political edifice—that grand architectural *chef d'œuvre* of manhood's maturity, redeeming the infant promise of Babel, and offering shelter and security to all classes and conditions of men; a structure nobly planned; in conception vast; in proportions, majestic, solid, and enduring. We have re-adjusted the social relations, abrogating some that were old and creating others new. Our civilization is a re-assertion of manhood's original "bill of rights," and the words master and slave are heard no more. We have made inhumanity a crime, and substituted for deeds of philanthropy the works of social justice. Love and mercy remain, but we have given them the nobler and holier names of right and duty. By narrowing the circle of the sentimental and gratuitous we have secured every just claim of man, without making him a mendicant on

anybody's bounty. Our civilization is, moreover, the common heritage of the race; and every man, woman, and child on earth is heir to its blessings, share and share alike. We acknowledge neither caste nor class privilege; the unit, man, is the basis of our partition.

But is this really the unit? There are in every man two lives, as distinct as if they were not united in oneness of personality; two natures that live apart, each subject to its own laws of health and development. There are in every man a Jacob and an Esau, who struggle for the mastery from their issuance, and even in their issuance from the womb. Multiply the number of men now living by two, and you will have the whole number of individual human lives throbbing with present hope or writhing in the agony of past disappointment. We still have in our civilization a "relic of barbarism" which gives to the material man the promise, and to the intellectual man the pottage, of the age's inheritance.

Without going to the absurd extreme of denying the existence of external objects and reducing the universe to the limits of personal consciousness, we can safely say that man lives chiefly and preëminently in his own thoughts. The senses are but delvers in the mines of matter, material light aiding in the work of discovery. They come back laden with the ore of experience, which, by reason's dissolvent, is reduced to the gold of knowledge. The spirit of man scorns contact with earth. The mind itself is no vagabond; like a hermit in his cell, it sits and sifts the reports of those viewless couriers of thought who wander evermore. Man's outward seeming, his visible life, his actions on society and society's reactions upon him, are but the non-committal utterances of the mind's diplomacy, the cautious official bulletins from the camp or court of our interior life. Every human life is a little kingdom, whose fixed policy is the maintenance of the balance of power between clashing domestic interests. In human life, the fairest side is always out, and a calm exterior often conceals deadly strife in the heart's distracted household. We have introduced civilization into warfare and subjected to law the commerce and comity of nations. Is there no law to reach this dark council chamber where man holds mysterious communings with his thoughts? After the mind dismisses its ministers of sense and wraps itself about in the mantle of its sovereign individuality, can it claim emancipa-

tion from all law and freedom from all restraint? Is the thinking man a thoroughly lawless and irresponsible being? We think not. The multitudinous progeny of the brain are not wild tribes in the republic of letters, without laws or reservations. The principle that "the king can do no wrong" does not apply to the autocrat of letters.

Thoughts have their ethics as well as deeds. A man has a right to his opinion; but not always. He has a right to his opinion if his opinion is right. Perhaps that opinion is born of ignorance; if so, to say that he has a right to the opinion is to assert that he has a right to the ignorance. That opinion may be the result of prejudice, and he has no more right to hold the one than to entertain the other. A man has a right to hold a right opinion, and the further right to be righteously disabused of a wrong opinion. Human laws, in regulating the external actions of men, but formulate the civilization that enacts them. But they only regulate the conduct of men toward each other. With acts that begin and end with the individual, and which nowise affect the rights of others, human laws have nothing to do. Laws are expedients. What instinct does for the lower animals, in securing for them peace and plenty, that human laws do for men. The most perfect laws the world has known or can know but guarantee to man what instinct secures to the brute creation. Not only the bees and the ants live in a perfect society, but the bears and the vultures enjoy the luxury of good government. In the vast wilderness, where the foot of man has never trodden, the savage beast enjoys a law which its instinct, could it think, would formulate into our "*Salus populi suprema lex esto.*" But there are fountains of law far beyond the reach of the human lawgiver, fountains of freshness and purity from which only the conscience can drink. Beyond our high and grand civilization there is a higher and grander still—the civilization of the cultured soul. The ages of the world most renowned for their material civilization were oftentimes eras of exceptional brutality. The most polished nation in the world is the French; yet a French duelist will withdraw his rapier from out the heart of his antagonist, executing a bow the while that would make a society actor turn yellow with envy. The Antonines sought solace from the cares of state by witnessing a butchery in the amphitheater, and in the days of cultured Greece cripples and idiots were outside the protection of the laws.

The war-whoop of the intellectual savages of our time is "Free Thought." This is the most laconic paradox ever uttered. By thought we are to understand the assent of the mind. Now, conviction gravitates to truth, when demonstrated, just as infallibly as water seeks its level or bodies fall to the earth. It is not in the power of the human mind to deny a truth once its existence is demonstrated. If freedom of thought means liberty to impugn the known truth, then to be mentally free we have but to apostatize from reason. If by "Free Thought" we are to understand emancipation from system, we are guilty of greater absurdity; for to accept a system, and, at the same time, to deny what follows from it, is to believe that a thing can be both true and false in the same respect. If every thinker is bound at the outset of his career to abjure all systems and theories and generalizations, we shall never get away from the A B C's of knowledge. If we mean that we must not be bound to a system or theory until we have proved its truth, we may ask what power can shackle the faculties of the mind? What court can issue, what minion serve, a writ upon reason? What prison bars can contain an idea? But, perhaps, we are to understand freedom of thought to mean that man is not accountable for his thoughts. I have shown that thoughts are the most human of human acts; now I will try to prove that they are subject to the common laws of human ethics. A man who reads a libel, knowing that it has been adjudged a libel by a court of competent jurisdiction, is guilty of an offense before the law. Why? Because the law holds that every man of good repute has a right in his good name. What honest husband, finding the groundlessness of the suspicion he has harbored against his innocent wife, does not feel his conscience smite him, and urge him to make confession and seek forgiveness? The injurious thought may never have found lodgment in the eye, may never have been fondled by the quivering lips, may never have risen on tiptoe to the ear; the heart gave it room, and that is enough to make him hate himself. What grander asseveration of constancy can man make to doubting woman than to say he never injured her even in thought?

But is the mind absolved from law when it soars to the realm of pure thought, when roaming over the fields of speculation, fancy free? Ah! here man feels like a god; he creates new worlds with every fiat of conception, and the law of their

life is an emanation from his own thinking essence. The realm of purest thought should be the field of the loftiest morality. Des Cartes would have us believe that the world of thought is a region of ceaseless tempest, abysmal darkness howling to the abysmal dark; that the only safe retreat for the tempest-tossed mind is the eyrie of universal doubt. That sounds like the Johannic "In Principio" of the gospel of despair. It summons the naturally religious soul to commit suicide on the altar of a stone-eyed philosophy. Man could not be a rational being without a free will. All laws, human and divine, are but the dictates of truth; they emanate from practical reason and presuppose freedom of choice. What civilization is to human conduct, that the ethics of the mind is to human thought. But a man may be socially civilized and in thought a barbarian; and, *vice versâ*, intellectually a gentleman and socially a boor. Whited sepulchres are not always the men who wear a fair exterior and are inwardly knaves; they, too, deserve the name who have the hearts and habits of men, but in blasphemy resemble the demons.

Barbarism is distinguished from civilization by a certain wild pride and independence that brook no control; a total disregard of others' rights; a callous indifference to the infliction of pain, and a general uncertainty and unfixedness of property tenure. A barbarous society is one based on the maximum of selfishness consistent with individual safety. An intellectual barbarian roams over the world of thought as if it had never been surveyed or portioned in severalty. He respects neither ownership nor occupancy. All theories, all systems, all general principles, he considers the usurpations of intellectual feudal lords, and he strikes at the grasping aristocracy of thought. As all property is robbery to the Communist, even so is all principle usurpation to the Freethinker. It is not strange, therefore, that we find Communism and Free Thought indigenous to the same social soil and thriving under similar atmospheric conditions. The intellectual barbarian sees chains in social customs and tyranny in all social order. The vast ramifications of human interests claim no consideration from him: although the grandest and best institutions of society should be buried in the fall, he boldly lays his ax to the root of the tree, nor recks the cost. What to him the truth, so patent to other people, that principles underlie morality, and morality

is the basis of society? What cares he for the abstract proposition, that without morality even civil government is impossible? He answers you with the hoarse shout: "*Fiat libertas; ruat imperium;*" and he straightway lays his intellectual dynamite at the foot of the social arch. He swoops down like a literary Attila on the fair provinces of conservative knowledge, his feverish activity stimulated by feelings akin to those ascribed to Blücher when that burly soldier first entered London. A book by a Free-thinker is a store-house of booty, collected during a life-time of literary outlawry.

The literary savage, too, loves to inflict pain. The holiest relations of life, the fondest conceptions of duty, the dearest creations of philanthropic fancy are the objects of his malignant destructiveness. In common with all savages, he requires a vast territory to roam over. A Freethinker dabbles in theology, philosophy, political economy, history, physics—in any and every study that can be reached by a bullet of blatant negation. He is a slave to a master. No savage Indian ever obeyed his chief with half the alacrity that literary braves show in following their chosen leaders. They are the veriest slaves of certain literary dictators. The Tecumseh of the theological tribe is Voltaire. The Sitting Bull of the political tribe is Paine. The Logan of the scientific tribe is elective, the beads and feathers being generally awarded to the latest God-killer.

The people who have kept pace with the development of civilization will understand that the social world is one of law and order, in which individual sacrifice contributes to the strength and safety of the commonwealth. The same law of compensation holds in the world of thought. A savage is proud and self-reliant; a civilized man is modest and prudent, even to timidity. The wise thinker knows that his knowledge is a little dim light visible against a dark and illimitable background of the unknown. There is a capital X in every mental conception. What we first apprehend by the senses and afterward comprehend by reflection is the thing nearest our intellectual vision; stretching out and away to the vast horizon and beyond lies the infinite unknown. Every thought of man is a single reflection. Change the angle of vision, and it becomes a mixed image; above and about the picture, yet blended with it, are the bold outlines of his shortsightedness and insufficiency. The philosopher who said, "This only do I know, that I know nothing," was not guilty

of so great a paradox. Blind pride may battle against the conclusion; baffled inquiry may clutch at the intangible entities that lurk behind phenomena; but to the one inevitable conclusion all insurrectionary reasonings must come at last. Man is himself enlightened, but the light that illumines him is not man. To abolish all reciprocity between the natural and the supernatural, men have tortured their reason into all manner of Procrustean theories. Take this one, for instance: "*Dubito; ergo cogito. Cogito; ergo sum.*" Here is a marvel of deduction more violent than any the wildest superstition teaches: absolute certainty born of absolute doubt; luminous day begotten of Cimmerian night. A man who, to convince himself that his eyes are not channels of vision, should pluck them out, would not be guilty of more stupendous folly. Yet from this germ has the whole field of modern philosophy been overgrown. This is intellectual suicide—an apostasy of reason. From the first moment of consciousness the mind travels in the border-land of the infinite; and as Columbus inferred that there must be a continent lying off to the west from the drift-wood borne on the waves, so the honest thinker must know that there is the infinite beyond from the broken fragments of truth that drift upon the shores of sense. The man who sublimely thinks must profoundly adore. To him, the boundless sky of speculation is a symbol of infinity, and he bows his head and worships. A little humility is an unfailing antidote for universal doubt.

Men have vested rights in their thought, as they have valid titles to their property. If rights, duties also. And rights and duties are not mere conventionalities. A shipwrecked crew, cast upon an unknown and uninhabited island, will not hesitate to punish crimes against which, in organized communities, laws are enacted. In cases of crimes committed against the laws of the land, the accused has the right to a full, fair, and impartial hearing. In the republic of letters, no man should take the law into his own hands. Private vengeance is wrong in letters as in law. We must be just in our thoughts when we have to do with the thoughts of other men. When sitting in judgment on our literary neighbor, we should remember that possession is itself a right, and that the thoughts we judge are in possession. Two wrongs make not a right in law or letters. The man who originates and gives to the world a dishonest thought is guilty of a high crime against the peace and majesty of sovereign

reason. The man who publishes to the world an ignorant conclusion is guilty of a literary misdemeanor. The injunction to prove all things, and to hold fast that which is good, is the first and the greatest commandment to the thinker. There is modesty in letters. The best interests of the literary commonwealth demand that the accused thinker be tried by a jury of his peers. The greatest scandal of letters is the habit of literary tyros and novices of summoning before their ignorant bar the great thinkers of the world. When Jehovah threatened to give the Israelites boys for princes, he menaced a state of confusion that has been realized in this literary age. Especially in the inexact or speculative sciences is this scandal to be seen. It requires a skillful navigator to essay unknown seas, and only he who has traveled long and safely the ocean paths marked on the chart can hope for success in exploring untried waters. Only the expert can prospect successfully beneath the earth's unviolated crust. In like manner, only he who has studied long and well the exact sciences can safely and profitably delve in the mines of speculation.

There is piety in thought. The "*laudator temporis acti*" is always a taciturn individual. The man who of all men talks loudest and longest is the self-appointed spokesman of a shallow-minded age. What was said by Johnson of the work of a writer of his day is true of much of the literary product of our time: "What is good is not new; and what is new is not good." A passion for novelty in thought and expression oftentimes makes us victims of cruel deception. What we accept as genuine literary coin is frequently the basest of counterfeits. Great men and mighty thinkers were in this world ages before we were born; and centuries after we are gone their names will be repeated, and greater thinkers still will look across the lowlands of our commonplace to those still towering eminences, wondering how nature can rob a million men to make one great man. They will wonder more if they discover any specimens of our ephemeral literature to find how little, of all we know, we credit to the sources from which it sprung. We study nature more than the ancients; but the ancients studied man more than we. The field of ancient thought was not uniformly fruitful; ours is rankly luxuriant. But we should not forget that their skies were not as kind as ours; yet, under exceptional conditions, there grew in those by-gone days lofty intellectual cedars, whose roots, grasping the solid rock of everlasting truth, have held fast

during the storms and tempests of the intervening years; and they stand bold and erect to-day, monumental of an age of God-like thinkers. We should treat the thoughts of contemporaries with justice; those of the ancients with justice and reverence.

All thought is imperial. In speech and port it is grandly monarchical. Though it should reign supreme but for a moment, for that moment it is a sceptered sovereign. But in the flash of its momentary supremacy it should not act the tyrant. Let not the royal thinker put out the eyes of the little literary princelings who may one day be competitors for his throne. An upstart thinker sometimes plays fantastic literary tricks that make sober common sense weep.

There is moral purity in thought. Men have often wondered why the poetic thought of every age is so impure. Poetry is the vernacular of the soul in a state of spiritual elation. Sensuous poetry is the language of the soul aflame with lustful passion. The "fine frenzy" into which the fiery poet so ruthlessly plunges is an atmosphere of wildest freedom and illimitable impunity. If there is a taint of impurity in the eagle's eye, he shows it when he looks at the sun. If there is an ugly spot, one feather of off-color, in the wing of the flyer, it appears when he spreads his pinions in the empyrean of fancy. The poet, of all men, should be "pure of heart" if he would see the true, the beautiful, and the good. Some one has warned us "to look out, when God sends a thinker on this planet"; the warning is well spoken, if that thinker be an impure poet. Impure poetry is the phosphorus that plays above the decay of a putrid society. It is the "abomination of desolation" standing in the holy place of God-like fancy, presaging the destruction of religion and the ruin and downfall of the temple of faith. To her lascivious poets of the last century France owes her infidelity of to-day. We should never surrender our thoughts to the keeping of the unclean. An author who takes his reader into his confidence and whispers into his ear an indelicate word, a word that if overheard would cause modesty to blush, is a wretch and a villain. We may not go in thought where to be corporeally would be contamination. A man generally rises or sinks to the level of his thoughts. Blasted reputations are the closing chapters of downward-thought lives. From what has been said, we are warranted in asserting that thought is a thing of conscience, and has ethics and a civilization peculiarly its own.

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